

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF FLORIDA

CASE NO.

**00-8142**

**CIV-LENARD**

**MAGISTRATE  
TURNOFF.**

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

PLAINTIFF,

v.

AUTOMATIC MERCHANDISING CORP.,

a Florida corporation; and

ALAN R. MANNING, individually, and as an  
officer of the corporation,

DEFENDANTS.

FILED BY \_\_\_\_\_  
00 FEB 14 PM 4:11  
CLERK U.S. DIST. CT.  
S.D. OF FLA.-FTL

**COMPLAINT FOR CIVIL PENALTIES, CONSUMER REDRESS,  
PERMANENT INJUNCTION AND OTHER EQUITABLE RELIEF**

Plaintiff, the United States of America, acting upon notification and authorization to the Attorney General by the Federal Trade Commission ("FTC" or "the Commission"), pursuant to Section 16(a)(1) of the Federal Trade Commission Act ("FTC Act"), 15 U.S.C. § 56(a)(1), for its complaint alleges:

1. Plaintiff brings this action under Sections 5(a), 5(m)(1)(A), 13(b), 16(a) and 19 of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. §§ 45(a), 45(m)(1)(A), 53(b), 56(a) and 57b, to secure civil penalties, consumer redress, a permanent injunction and other equitable relief for defendants' violations of the FTC's Trade Regulation Rule entitled "Disclosure Requirements and Prohibitions Concerning Franchising and Business Opportunity Ventures" (the "Franchise Rule" or the "Rule"), 16 C.F.R. Part 436, and Section 5(a) of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. § 45(a).

## **JURISDICTION AND VENUE**

2. This Court has subject matter jurisdiction over this action pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1331, 1337(a), 1345, and 1355, and 15 U.S.C. §§ 45(m)(1)(A), 53(b), 56(a) and 57b. This action arises under 15 U.S.C. § 45(a).

3. Venue in the United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida is proper under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1391(b)-(c) and 1395(a), and 15 U.S.C. § 53(b).

## **DEFENDANTS**

4. Defendant Automatic Merchandising Corp. ("AMC"), a Florida corporation with its principal place of business at 4300 U.S. Highway One, Suite 203-315, Jupiter, Florida 33477, promotes and sells display rack business ventures. AMC transacts or has transacted business in the Southern District of Florida.

5. Defendant Alan R. Manning is the President of AMC. In connection with the matters alleged herein, he transacts or has transacted business in the Southern District of Florida. At all times material to this complaint, acting alone or in concert with others, he has formulated, directed, controlled or participated in the acts and practices of the corporate defendant, including the acts and practices set forth in this complaint.

## **COMMERCE**

6. At all times relevant to this complaint, the defendants have maintained a substantial course of trade in the offering for sale and sale of display rack business ventures, in or affecting commerce, as "commerce" is defined in Section 4 of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. § 44.

## **DEFENDANTS' BUSINESS ACTIVITIES**

7. The defendants offer and sell display rack business ventures to prospective purchasers. The defendants promote their business ventures through classified ads in newspapers.

8. In their advertisements, defendants make representations about the earnings potential of their business venture, and urge consumers to call defendants' toll-free telephone number to learn more about the opportunity. For example, defendants' classified newspaper advertisements have stated:

HUGE PROFITS Distribute NU/BREATH  
candy minds, PT/FT. KILLS alcohol & tobacco  
breath. Big \$\$ NO COMPETITION.  
Low invest. 1-888-527-6225

9. Consumers who call the defendants' toll-free telephone number are ultimately connected to defendants, or their employees or agents, who make representations about the earnings potential of the business venture and the actual earnings of prior purchasers, without giving prospective purchasers access to the information they need to evaluate the claims. For example, the defendants or their employees or agents have represented that 100 of their display racks typically generate a profit of \$150,000 per year.

## **THE FRANCHISE RULE**

10. The business ventures sold by the defendants are franchises, as "franchise" is defined in Section 436.2(a)(1)(i) and (ii), (a)(2) and (a)(5) of the Franchise Rule, 16 C.F.R. § 436.2(a)(1)(i) and (ii), (a)(2) and (a)(5).

11. The Franchise Rule requires a franchisor to provide prospective franchisees with a complete and accurate basic disclosure document containing twenty categories of information,

including information about the litigation and bankruptcy history of the franchisor and its principals, the terms and conditions under which the franchise operates, and information identifying existing franchisees. 16 C.F.R. § 436.1(a)(1) - (a)(20). The pre-sale disclosure of this information required by the Rule enables a prospective franchisee to contact prior purchasers and take other steps to assess the potential risks involved in the purchase of the franchise.

12. The Franchise Rule additionally requires: (1) that the franchisor have a reasonable basis for any oral, written, or visual earnings or profit representations (“earnings claims”) it makes to a prospective franchisee, 16 C.F.R. § 436.1(b)(2), (c)(2) and (e)(1); (2) that the franchisor provide to prospective franchisees an earnings claim document containing information substantiating any earnings claims it makes, 16 C.F.R. § 436.1(b)-(e); and (3) that the franchisor, in immediate conjunction with any generally disseminated earnings claim, disclose additional information including the number and percentage of prior purchasers known by the franchisor to have achieved the same or better results, 16 C.F.R. § 436.1(e)(3)-(4).

13. Pursuant to Section 18(d)(3) of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. 57a(d)(3), and 16 C.F.R. § 436.1, violations of the Franchise Rule constitute unfair or deceptive acts or practices in or affecting commerce, in violation of Section 5(a) of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. § 45(a).

### **VIOLATIONS OF THE FRANCHISE RULE**

#### **COUNT ONE**

14. Paragraphs 1 through 13 are incorporated herein by reference.

15. In connection with the offering of franchises, as “franchise” is defined in the Rule, 16 C.F.R. § 436.2(a), defendants have failed to provide prospective franchisees with accurate and complete basic disclosure documents within the time period required by the Franchise Rule, thereby

violating Section 436.1(a) of the Rule, 16 C.F.R. § 436.1(a), and Section 5 of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. § 45.

### **COUNT TWO**

16. Paragraphs 1 through 13 are incorporated herein by reference.

17. In connection with the offering of franchises, as “franchise” is defined in the Rule, 16 C.F.R. § 436.2(a), defendants or their employees or agents have made earnings claims within the meaning of the Rule, 16 C.F.R. § 436.1(b)-(d), but have failed to provide prospective franchisees with earnings claim documents within the time period required by the Franchise Rule, have failed to have a reasonable basis for such claims at the times they were made, or have failed to disclose the information required by the Rule in immediate conjunction with such claims, thereby violating Sections 436.1(b)-(d) of the Rule, 16 C.F.R. § 436.1(b)-(d), and Section 5 of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. § 45.

### **CONSUMER INJURY**

18. Consumers in the United States have suffered and will suffer substantial monetary loss as a result of defendants’ violations of the Franchise Rule and the FTC Act. Absent injunctive relief by this Court, defendants are likely to continue to injure consumers and harm the public interest.

### **THIS COURT’S POWER TO GRANT RELIEF**

19. Section 13(b) of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. § 53(b), empowers this Court to grant injunctive and other ancillary relief, including consumer redress, disgorgement and restitution, to prevent and remedy any violations of any provision of law enforced by the Federal Trade Commission.

20. Section 5(m)(1)(A) of the FTC Act, § 45(m)(1)(A), as modified by Section 4 of the Federal Civil Penalties Inflation Adjustment Act of 1990, 28 U.S.C. § 2461, as amended, and as implemented by 16 C.F.R. § 1.98(d) (1997), authorizes this Court to award civil penalties of not more than \$11,000 for each violation of the Franchise Rule occurring after November 20, 1996. The defendants' violations of the Rule were committed after that date and with the knowledge required by Section 5(m)(1)(A) of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. § 45(m)(1)(A).

21. Section 19 of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. § 57b, authorizes this Court to grant such relief as the Court finds necessary to redress injury to consumers or other persons resulting from defendants' violations of the Franchise Rule, including the rescission and reformation of contracts, and the refund of money.

22. This Court, in the exercise of its equitable jurisdiction, may award ancillary relief to remedy injury caused by the defendants' violations of the Franchise Rule and the FTC Act.

#### **PRAYER FOR RELIEF**

WHEREFORE, plaintiff requests that this Court, as authorized by Sections 5(a), 5(m)(1)(A), 13(b) and 19 of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. §§ 45(a), 45(m)(1)(A), 53(b) and 57b, and pursuant to its own equitable powers:

1. Enter judgment against the defendants and in favor of the plaintiff for each violation alleged in this complaint;
2. Permanently enjoin the defendants from violating the Franchise Rule and the FTC Act;
3. Award plaintiff monetary civil penalties from each defendant for every violation of the Franchise Rule;

4. Award such relief as the Court finds necessary to redress injury to consumers resulting from the defendants' violations of the Franchise Rule and the FTC Act, including but not limited to, rescission of contracts, the refund of monies paid, and the disgorgement of ill-gotten gains; and

5. Award plaintiff the costs of bringing this action, as well as such other and additional relief as the Court may determine to be just and proper.

DATED:

Of Counsel:

EILEEN HARRINGTON  
Associate Director for  
Marketing Practices  
Federal Trade Commission  
Washington, D.C. 20580

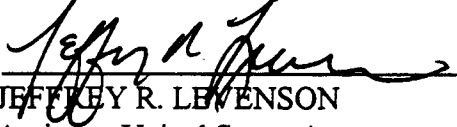
CRAIG TREGILLUS  
Attorney  
Federal Trade Commission  
Washington, D.C. 20580  
PHONE: (202) 326-2970  
FAX: (202) 326-3395


FOR THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA:

DAVID W. OGDEN  
Acting Assistant Attorney General  
Civil Division  
U.S. Department of Justice

THOMAS E. SCOTT  
United States Attorney

By:

  
JEFFREY R. LEVENSON  
Assistant United States Attorney  
500 E. Broward Blvd., 7th Floor  
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33394  
Florida Bar No. 383570  
Tel: (954) 356-7314, Ext. 3611  
Fax: (954) 356-7180

  
ALLISON M. HARNISCH  
Trial Attorney  
Office of Consumer Litigation  
P.O. Box 386  
Washington, D.C. 20044  
PHONE: (202) 307-0047  
FAX: (202) 514-8742